

TWO STAGE FUSING METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR HIGH-SPEED FULL PROCESS COLOR

BACKGROUND

[0001] The present exemplary embodiment relates to an image forming apparatus using an electrostatographic system. It finds particular application in conjunction with a two stage fusing method and system for high-speed full process color printing and copying, and will be described with particular reference thereto. However, it is to be appreciated that the present exemplary embodiment is also amenable to other like applications.

[0002] In conventional electrostatographic printing machines, a charge retentive surface is charged to a uniform potential and exposed to a light source to selectively discharge the charge retentive surface to form a latent electrostatic image thereon. The image may be either the discharged portions or the charged portions of the charge retentive surface. The light source may be any well known device such as a light lens scanning system or a laser beam. Subsequently, the electrostatic latent image on the charge retentive surface is rendered visible by developing the image with developer powder referred to in the art as toner. The visible toner image is in a loose powdered form and can be easily disturbed or destroyed. The toner image is usually fed through a fusing apparatus where it is heated to permanently affix it to the copy sheet, thus forming a black and white copy of the original document.

[0003] For producing highlight color (HLC) images on documents, an extension is made to the base black and white print engine with the addition of one or two HLC marking stations. These can be thought of as multiple black and white marking elements except that the toner used has color pigments. The black and white image or the color image may be formed first on the photoconductive surface. The major

difference between HLC and the full color processing described below is that there is only one layer of toner, and, therefore, there is no need for extra fusing.

[0004] Multi-color electrostatographic printing machines using multi-colored toners are substantially identical in each color image forming process to the foregoing process of black and white printing, which uses only black toner. However, rather than forming a single latent image on the photoconductive surface, several single color latent images corresponding to color separated light images of the original document are recorded thereon. Each single color electrostatic latent image is developed with toner particles of a complementary color. This process may be performed in a single pass or in multiple passes during which image formation is repeated a plurality of cycles for differently colored images using their respective complementarily colored toner particles to form color toner images. Each single color toner powder image is transferred to a copy sheet in superimposed registration with the other toner powder images.

[0005] This process creates a composite multi-layered toner powder image on the copy sheet. The copy sheet is separated from the photoconductive member and, thereafter, the multi-layered toner powder image on the sheet is fed through a fusing apparatus and permanently affixed to the copy sheet, thus creating a color copy of the original multi-color document. In a black and white or multi-color electrostatographic printing machine, the copy sheet is typically brought into moving contact with the photoconductive member during toner powder image transfer to the copy sheet. A sheet transport apparatus is typically provided for receiving the copy sheet incrementally as it is separated from the photoconductive member, and for transporting the copy sheet towards and into the fusing apparatus.

[0006] The use of thermal energy for fixing toner images onto a support member is well known. In order to fuse toner onto a support surface permanently by heat, it is necessary to elevate the temperature of the toner to a point at which the constituents of the toner coalesce and become tacky. This heating causes the toner to flow to some extent into the fibers or pores of the support member. Thereafter, as the toner cools, solidification of the toner causes it to be firmly bonded to the support.

[0007] Several approaches to thermal fusing of toner images have been described in the prior art. These methods include providing the application of heat and pressure substantially concurrently by various means: a roll pair maintained in pressure contact; a belt member in pressure contact with a roll; and the like. Heat may be applied by heating one or both of the rolls, plate members or belt members. The fusing of the toner particles takes place when the proper combination of heat, pressure and contact (or dwell) time are provided. The balancing of these parameters to bring about the fusing of the toner particles is well known in the art, and they can be adjusted to suit particular machines or process conditions. Conventional fusing members and fusing systems are disclosed in Visser et al., U.S. Pat. No. 5,674,621; Uehara et al., U.S. Pat. No. 5,345,300; Jacobs, U.S. Pat. No. 5,268,559; Moore et al., U.S. Pat. No. 5,103,263; Schlueter, Jr., U.S. Pat. No. 4,763,158; and Vince, U.S. Pat. No. 3,584,195.

[0008] Many xerographic machines have been designed to produce only black and white or highlight color copies. However, in order to produce full process color copies, certain modifications would be needed. Fusing four layers of toners requires sophisticated fusing. Various approaches have been employed to produce full color copies at high speed, including using one very large fuser, one fuser with two fuser

roll-pressure roll assemblies side by side, or two smaller fusing stations within the main printing machine. However, there are problems with these two approaches. First, the costs of incorporating one large fuser along with heating may run quite high, and it is not always possible to fit such a large fuser or two smaller fusers within the main printing machine. Thus, there is a need for an apparatus and method for producing high speed full process color images while keeping costs down and maintaining the architectural and footprint integrity of the main printing platform, which is generally designed to print black and white and HLC images.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

[0009] In accordance with one aspect of the present exemplary embodiment, there is provided an image forming apparatus, which includes a user interface for setting of image forming operation, a sheet feeder section including a plurality of sheet stacks and a sheet transport system, a first printing section including a first fusing assembly for partial fusing of toner images of four colors and robust fusing of toner images of black and white or highlight color and a duplexing assembly, and a second printing section including a second fusing assembly for robust fusing of toner images of four colors. The secondary printing section is connected and disposed at one of both sides of the first printing section, the sheet feeder section is connected and disposed at the other side, and the sections are used in an integrated state. The image forming apparatus further comprises a finishing section connected and disposed at one side of the secondary printing station and having an output portion.

[0010] In accordance with another aspect of the present exemplary embodiment, there is provided a method of forming images on a sheet using an image forming apparatus, which has a first printing section and a second printing section. The

method includes obtaining a toner image on the first side of the sheet. Where the toner image on the first side comprises a full color image, the image is partially fused to the first side with a first fusing assembly in the first printing section at a level sufficient to permit handling of the sheet within the apparatus, and where the toner image on the first side comprises a black and white or highlight color image, the image is fully fused to the first side with the first fusing assembly. In the case where duplexing mode has been selected, a toner image is obtained on the second side of the sheet. Where the toner image on the second side comprises a full color image, the image is partially fused to the first side with the first fusing assembly at a level sufficient to permit handling of the sheet within the apparatus, and where the toner image on the first side comprises a black and white or highlight color image, the image is fully fused to the first side with the first fusing assembly. Finally, where at least one toner image on the sheet comprises a full color image, the full color image is fully fused to the sheet with a second fusing assembly in the second printing section.

[0011] In accordance with yet another aspect of the present exemplary embodiment, there is provided an apparatus for receiving a partially fused image sheet from a xerographic printer. The apparatus includes a fuser assembly for final fusing of the partially fused image sheet, a release agent delivery system for applying a release agent material, and a gloss enhancing station disposed downstream of the second fusing assembly for selectively enhancing the gloss properties of an image.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0012] FIG. 1 is a schematic view of a image creating apparatus;

[0013] FIG. 2 is a schematic elevation view of a xerographic printing station within the image creating apparatus;

[0014] FIG. 3 is a schematic elevation view of a belt fuser for robust fusing; and

[0015] FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary method of two stage fusing for high speed full process color.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0016] With reference to FIGS. 1 and 2, there is shown, in schematic form, a view of an image creating apparatus 2 for creating images in accordance with teachings of the present exemplary embodiment. Although the exemplary embodiment will be described with reference to the single embodiment shown in the drawings, it should be understood that many alternate forms of embodiments are contemplated. In addition, any suitable size, shape or type of elements or materials could be used. A copying or printing system of the type shown is preferably adapted to provide simplex or duplex stacked document sets from simplex or duplex collated document or print sets which result from either simplex or duplex original documents or output document computer files for print. The image creating apparatus 2, in the embodiment shown, is a copier. However, in an alternate embodiment, the apparatus could be a printer or any other suitable type of image creating apparatus.

[0017] The image creating apparatus 2 generally comprises a sheet feeder section 4, a xerographic processing or printing section 6, a finishing section 8 and an output section 10. A user interface 11 in which a display screen, an operation button, and a key for performing condition setting of image forming operation is also included. The printing section 6 typically incorporates an image transfer system and a transport system for transporting sheets of material. The finishing section 8 may

typically incorporate a hole punch, a stapler, or any other suitable type of feature known in the art. The output section **10** incorporates at least one tray **12** that accepts and stacks documents or document sets output from the finishing section **8**.

Documents are printed or copied in the printing section **6** and output to the finishing section **8**. Documents can be sorted and bound at the finishing section **8**. Document sets can be output from the finishing section **8** at the output section **10** via the trays **12**.

[0018] With reference to FIGS. **1** and **2**, the printing section **6** preferably comprises two separate components, a primary printing station **14** and an independent secondary printing station **16**. Preferably, the secondary printing station **16** is adjacent and external to the primary printing station **14**. The secondary printing station **16** may be coupled to the primary printing station **14** by brackets or the like. The main printing station **14** can be an electrostatographic printing system such as those made by Xerox Corporation or, alternately, another xerographic or other type of printing apparatus. The main printing station **14** includes a photoconductive belt **18** that advances in the direction of arrow **20**. The photoconductive belt **18** passes through four charging stations **22Y**, **22M**, **22C**, and **22K** and four exposure stations **24Y**, **24M**, **24C**, and **24K** for forming toner images of four colors of yellow (Y), magenta (M), cyan (C), and black (K). The exposure stations **24Y**, **24M**, **24C**, and **24K** are typically raster output scanners that transmit a latent image from the controller **26** onto the photoconductive surface of the photoconductive belt **18**. The controller **26** gets the image from the input scanner **28**, which typically scans an image from a document handler **30**. In the alternative, the controller **26** gets the image from a separate computer **32** when the printing section **6** operates as a printing device. The photoconductive belt **18** then advances

to four development stations **34Y**, **34M**, **34C**, and **34K**, where toner from storage units **35Y**, **35M**, **35C**, and **35K** is electrostatically attracted to the latent image. The photoconductive belt **18** then advances to an image transfer station **36**. Meanwhile, a sheet of material **38** is advanced from one of the sheet stacks **40**, **42**, **44**, or **46** by a sheet transport system **47**, which includes a registration system (not shown). The sheet **38** is advanced past the image transfer station **36** in a timed fashion. The toner deposited on the latent image of photoconductive belt **18** is transferred to the sheet **38** due to the sheet **38** becoming charged at the image transfer station **36** and due to the sheet **38** being registered or timed relative to the latent image.

[0019] The sheet **38** is advanced to a first fusing station **48** by a belt **49**, where the toner image is affixed to the sheet **38**, typically by heating, thus creating a document sheet. The sheet **38** may be recirculated through the printing section to have a second (or duplex) image deposited on its opposite side.

[0020] The first fusing station **48** permanently affixes (or fuses) the transferred image to the sheet. Preferably, the first fusing station **48** comprises a roll fuser assembly **50**, which includes a heated fuser roller **52** and a backup or pressure roller **54**. The copy sheet **38** passes between the fuser roller **52** and the backup roller **54** with the toner powder image contacting the fuser roller **52**. In this manner, the multi-color toner powder image is permanently affixed to the sheet. In the case of black and white images, the fusing of the image to the sheet is complete. That is, no further fusing is necessary. However, color images are only partially fused to the sheet. That is, the first fusing station **48** partially affixes the image to the sheet to a sufficient level so that the partially fused sheet can be transported around the duplex path. Thus, the first printing station **14** is generally limited to producing finished black and white or highlight color images or partially finished full color images. Such

images may be produced at a rate of at least 120 to 180 pages per minute (ppm), although faster rates may be possible. In order to produce robust full process color images, the secondary printing station **16** is needed.

[0021] After fusing at the first fusing station **48**, the chute **56** guides the advancing sheet **38** through the output **58** to the secondary printing station **16**. However, for duplex operation, the sheet **38** is reversed in position at the inverter **60** and transported to the duplexing assembly **62**. The sheet **38** receives an image on the second side thereof, at the transfer station **36**, in the same manner as the image was deposited on the first side thereof. The completed duplex copy exits to the secondary printing station **16** via the output **58**.

[0022] The secondary printing station **16** includes a secondary fusing station **64**, which is shown as a roll fuser in FIG. 2. The secondary fusing station **64** generally comprises a roll fuser assembly **65**, which includes a heated fuser roller **66** and a backup or pressure roller **68**. In the case of full color copies, the partially fused copy sheet **38** passes between the fuser roller **66** and the backup roller **68** with the toner powder image contacting the fuser roller **66**. In this manner, the fusing of the multi-color toner powder image to the sheet is completed. In the case of black and white (or highlight color) images, since the fusing of the image to the sheet has already been completed at the first fusing station, the rollers **66** and **68** do not engage the sheet **38**. The sheet **38** then travels in the direction of arrow **70** to the finishing section **8**. The image creating apparatus **2** may produce full process color images at a rate of at least 100 to 120 ppm, although faster speeds may be possible.

[0023] Attention is now directed to FIG. 3, wherein an alternative secondary fusing station **100**, including a release agent management system, for use in the secondary printing station **16** is schematically illustrated. As shown in FIG. 3, the

secondary fusing station **100** comprises a belt fuser assembly **102**, which includes a heated fuser belt **104** and a pressure belt **106**. The belts **104**, **106** are endless belts, preferably flexible, which can be seamed or seamless. The belts **104**, **106** are thin, having a thickness ranging for example from about 3 to about 20 mils, with a relatively smooth surface. A suitable degree of smoothness ensures the desired image gloss for fusing spot on spot color images as opposed to spot next to spot images.

[0024] The fuser belt **104** is entrained about a pair of rollers **108**, **110** for movement in an endless path, while the pressure belt **106** is entrained about a pair of rollers **112**, **114** for movement in an endless path. To this end, a motor and a drive mechanism (not shown) are provided for effecting movement of the belt in the clockwise direction as viewed in the FIG. 3.

[0025] The fuser belt **104** and the pressure belt **106** form a fusing nip **116** through which the sheet **38** carrying relatively thick toner images, with the toner images contacting the smooth surface of the belt member. A radiant heating assembly, which includes a roller **118**, is provided for heating the belt in the nip.

[0026] A liquid release agent management or delivery system **120** may be provided for applying a release agent material such as silicone oil contained in a sump. The silicone oil is applied to the surface of the fuser belt **104**. A thin film of the release agent on the fuser belt ensures that the toner image is completely released from the fuser belt during the fusing operation, thereby preventing the offset phenomenon. The liquid release agent may be selected from those materials which have been conventionally used. Typical release agents include a variety of conventionally used silicone oils including both functional and non-functional oils. Thus, the release agent is selected to be compatible with the rest of the system.

[0027] In the case of full color copies, the partially fused copy sheet **38** passes between the fuser belt **104** and the backup belt **106** with the toner powder image contacting the fuser belt **104**. In this manner, the robust fusing of the multi-color toner powder image to the sheet is completed. In the case of black and white images, since the fusing of the image to the sheet has already been completed, the belts **104**, **106** do not engage the sheet **38**.

[0028] A gloss enhancing station **122** is preferably positioned downstream in the process direction for selectively enhancing the gloss properties of the sheet **38**. The gloss enhancing station **122** has opposed fusing members **124**, **126** defining a gloss nip **128** therebetween. The gloss nip **128** is adjustable to provide the selectability of the gloss enhancing. In particular, the fusing members are cammed whereby the transverse nip is sufficiently large to allow a document to pass through without substantial contact with either fusing member **124**, **126** that would cause glossing. When the operator selects gloss enhancement, the fusing members **124**, **126** are cammed into pressure relation and driven to thereby enhance the level of gloss on images passed through the gloss nip **128**. The amount of gloss enhancement is operator selectable by adjustment of the temperature of the fusing members **124**, **126**. Higher temperatures of the fusing members **124**, **126** will result in increased gloss enhancement. U.S. Pat. No. 5,521,688 (Hybrid Color Fuser) describes a gloss enhancing station with a radiant fuser.

[0029] The fusing members **124**, **126** are preferably fusing rollers, but they can be fusing belts. The top-most surface of each fusing member **124**, **126** is relatively non-conformable.

[0030] Although the apparatus **2** has been described in detail above, features of the present exemplary embodiment could be used with other types of xerographic

processing or printing sections having any suitably blank paper or sheet supply, created document output, image transfer system or paper path. The description above is merely intended to be exemplary. More or less features could also be provided.

[0031] FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary method **200** of two stage fusing for high speed full process color printing and copying. FIG. 4 is described below with reference to the apparatus **2** of FIGS. 1 and 2. It is to be understood that the method **200** may be implemented via software in the controller **26**.

[0032] In the first step **201**, a toner image is obtained on side A of the sheet **38** in the usual manner. Next, a determination is made as to whether the toner image on side A is a black and white or a highlight color image (step **202**). If it is black and white or highlight color, then the image is permanently and fully fused to side A (step **203**) in the usual manner. Otherwise, if the image is in full color, then the image is only partially fused to side A (step **204**). That is, the image is fused to side A to a sufficient level such that the sheet **38** may be transported through the duplexing assembly **62** if necessary. There are various ways to test for the proper level. For instance, a "crease fix" test may be utilized. With the crease fix test, a large solid area of toner is transferred to the paper and fused. The paper is then folded so that the fold is in the middle of the solid area. When the paper is folded, the toner slab on the surface of the paper will crack and form a crease. The width of the line visible is a measure of the fix level. The narrower the line, the higher the fix level. It is to be understood that other tests may be used to set the appropriate partial fusing level. These other tests include the Abrader test, where an area of the fused image is abraded using a known pressure for a given number of rubs and observing the density change. Thus, at this point in the process, the sheet **38** contains either a

fully or partially fused image on side A. Next, a determination is made as to whether the duplexing mode has been selected (step **205**). If so, then a toner image is obtained on side B of the sheet **38** (step **206**) in the usual manner. A determination is then made as to whether the toner image on side B is a black and white or HLC image (step **207**). If it is black and white (or HLC), then the image is permanently and fully fixed or fused to side B in the usual manner (step **208**). Otherwise, if the image is in full color, then the image is partially fused to side B as described above (step **209**).

[0033] A determination is then made as to whether at least one image on the sheet **38** is in full color (step **210**). If not, the sheet **38** proceeds through the secondary printing station **16** to the finishing section **8** (step **211**). That is, the sheet **38** does not come into contact with the fusing assembly **65** or **102** of the secondary printing station **16**. Otherwise, the sheet **38** is transported to the fusing assembly **65** or **102** secondary fusing station for full (or robust) fusing in the usual manner (step **212**) before being transported to the finishing section **8** (step **212**). Additionally, the gloss level of the image can be adjusted by using the gloss enhancing station **122** before finishing.

[0034] In summary, a smaller fuser such as that used for monochrome or HLC may be incorporated within the base architecture (or primary printing station) of a copying/printing platform. This primary fuser partially fuses a full color image on to the copy sheet to a level such that the sheet can be transported around the duplex path and registration elements. The sheet is then transported to a secondary fuser for completing the fusing process and to achieve the required level of gloss. The secondary fuser comprises an externally mounted larger roll fuser or a belt fuser. The gloss level can be selected by changing the characteristics of the secondary

fuser. With the secondary fuser being an externally module, the architectural and footprint integrity of the platform is maintained.

[0035] The exemplary embodiment has been described with reference to the preferred embodiments. Obviously, modifications and alterations will occur to others upon reading and understanding the preceding detailed description. It is intended that the exemplary embodiment be construed as including all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.

CLAIMS: